

U.S. Department of Justice  
Community Relations Service



# CRS BULLETIN

Rose Odi, Director, Community Relations Service

The Community Relations Service (CRS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, is the Federal government's "peacemaker" for community conflicts and tensions arising from differences of race, color, and national origin. Created by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, CRS is the only Federal agency whose purpose is to assist State and local units of government, private and public organizations, and community groups with preventing and resolving racial and ethnic tensions, conflicts, and civil disorders, and in restoring racial stability and harmony.

## Message from the Director:

Whether to use force is one of the most difficult and controversial decisions a police officer will make in the course of his or her duties. This decision, made in a matter of seconds and often without complete information, can have serious and far-reaching consequences.

Where there are good police-community relations and high confidence within the minority community in the integrity and accountability of the police department, a use of force incident may result in little turmoil. However, in communities where there are a lack of confidence between

police and minority residents and a perception that complaints about police misconduct will not be addressed fairly, no issue can be more racially explosive or more easily lead to violent disturbances. Under these circumstances, what can communities and police departments do to ease racial tensions, open lines of communication, and rebuild trust?

Our 35 years of experience in working with racial conflict and violence tell us that when police and residents join together in cooperative efforts to build trust and confidence, community stability and safety can be secured for all. There are specific steps that can be taken to reduce the prospect of turmoil following a use of force incident. Over the longer term, there are policies and practices which will help to improve the underlying conditions of police community relations, as well.

This Bulletin offers some practical recommendations to city officials, police executives, and community leaders on steps they can take to prevent community racial conflict associated with police use of force incidents and improve police policies and practices. Examples of CRS assistance to local communities are also included.

## Potential Flash Points

Whenever there is an incident of police use of force, especially one involving the death of a minority person, a predictable set of flash points follows. Each flash point potentially can lead to conflict, violence, and disorder. However, when police, officials, and community leaders take timely and appropriate preventive action, community peace can be secured and maintained. How communities react to these flash points will be influenced also by other variables, such as the existing climate of police-community relations, the nature and circumstances of the use of force incident, media coverage and rumors. A description of some of the potential flash points that commonly occur after police use of force incident follows.

## Flash Point: Initial Incident

Whenever an incident involves a police shooting or use of force, officers must be cognizant that their actions are not viewed in a vacuum. There are usually witnesses to an incident, and how it is perceived is subject to many interpretations. When there is distrust between police and the community, any police action will be subject to suspicion and scrutiny.

## Flash Point: Initial Law Enforcement Response

What the first responding officers to the incident do upon arriving on the scene is crucial to maintaining community peace and preserving the scene for investigators. The department's standard operating procedure for response to police shootings and use of force

community tensions. A public announcement of the department's investigation process assures the public that an orderly investigation and objective review of the incident will be conducted.

## Flash Point: Media Coverage

Press coverage can affect the level of community tension following a police incident. A straightforward objective statement of non-confidential information by the Department can go a long way in assuring the public that the situation is under control. This statement should contain the circumstances that preceded any police response and the process for and resources allocated to the investigation. These steps will help head off potentially inflammatory rumors.

## Flash Point: Protest Rallies and Marches

Protest rallies and marches allow the community to express their frustration and anger about an incident and can be beneficial safety valves. They also serve as opportunities for people to express their grief and anguish. Plans can be developed which provide for community protest protecting the peace and harmony of the participants and community-at large.

## Flash Point:Investigations

There should be no rush to judgment, but a full and complete investigation governed by an established protocol. Coordinating appropriate law enforcement agencies at all levels, including investigators and prosecutors, can help assure the fairness of the investigation.

In 1998, the National District Attorneys Association and the U.S. Department of Justice entered into a Memorandum of Understanding for Federal, State and local law enforcement agencies to implement a model protocol for the joint investigation of "color of law and hate crime cases."

CRS can help law enforcement officials meet with family and community members to advise them about the process and progress of law enforcement investigations.

*Springfield, MA - The shooting death of an African-American youth by a police officer was followed by a series of angry protests, demonstrations and heightened racial tensions. At a community meeting convened by the Urban League, CRS arranged for a clear explanation of the investigatory and legal processes and the options available to the victim's family and community. The meeting helped to defuse anger, and afforded an opportunity for the media to report the proceedings to the public at large.*

## Flash Point:Results of Investigations

The results of a coroner's inquest, grand jury findings, police internal affairs investigation, and prosecutor's findings may increase community tension levels. How the information is explained and made public has a great impact on reducing the potential for community disruption.

CRS also keeps lines of communication open between officials and community leaders, meeting with all parties preceding and following the announcement of the results of official investigations.

*Leland, MS - An investigation of a shooting death of an African American man after a traffic stop determined that the facts did not warrant prosecution of the police officer. Prior to the public announcement of this controversial decision, CRS arranged for a briefing by the prosecutor for the family and community leaders, including an opportunity for questions. As a result, community tensions were reduced.*

CRS assists local communities to develop contingency plans prior to the announcement of the results of investigations, especially when the basis for the decisions is disputed.

## Flash Point: Youth Response

How youth react to a police use of force incident may be critical to community stability. Specific outreach efforts should be directed to youth in the immediately affected community. The danger of civil unrest can thereby be reduced and steps can be taken in building positive relationships among youth, adults, and police.

## Flash Point: Collateral Incidents

Preventive measures should be taken to avoid new incidents igniting further conflicts during the course of an investigation. During such times, sensitivities and vulnerabilities are heightened.

*Ft. Yates, ND - In 1995, CRS helped police and tribal leaders of the Standing Rock Reservation address concerns over the death of a young Native American in the custody of BIA police. The victim's family had complained about law enforcement practices, raising concerns that his death may have occurred in retaliation to the family's initial complaints to the police about his treatment. CRS secured BIA's agreement to assess community concerns and initiate an investigation. Law enforcement officials advised family and community members about the investigation which resulted in the dismissal of an officer and the establishment of a strong policy against the harassment of complainants.*

## Flash Point: Trial

When local community tensions are heightened as a result of the announcement of a jury verdict, CRS serves as troubleshooters, resolving spontaneous conflicts "on the ground", helping to control rumors by providing accurate information, and serving as an impartial resource to all parties.



Comprehensive contingency planning can mobilize law enforcement, city officials, civic leaders, the media, and the leadership of the affected communities around the common interest of averting violence. CRS can facilitate briefings for community leaders by legal experts who explain the legal process and potential outcomes, building community trust and confidence in the justice system. When CRS receives advance notice of verdicts, it helps communities prepare for community reaction. Following public announcement of verdicts, CRS can be on-site to serve as a communication link between police and the community.

## Police-Community Problem Solving

Through its mediation process, CRS channels community tensions and anger into a constructive discussion of issues that often surface after a use of excessive force incident. Police may review community concerns regarding the "use of force" policy, diversifying the workforce, recruiting minority officers, hiring and selection criteria, training programs on race relations and diversity, promoting minority officers, and creating permanent mechanisms for improved police and community dialogue.

*Cincinnati, OH - CRS mediation efforts following the shooting death of an African American man resulted in a mediation agreement with the City of Cincinnati and various civil rights and religious groups, which included establishing a civilian oversight panel, appointing a civilian director of the police training academy, and developing an improved civilian complaint data base and tracking system.*

While issues regarding the specific incident must be addressed, attention should also be given to broader underlying concerns which often are at the root of community frustration and conflict.

Preventive measures may include a review of departmental policies on the use of force and the use of deadly force, including firearms policy and use of restraints. A coalition of leaders can be formed to address how to achieve better police community relations. Community input should be solicited during this review, including requests for public comment and discussion. Communities should know the various options available at the Federal, State, and local levels to address concerns over police use of excessive force.

*Portland, OR - Following the death of an African American man from a carotid-artery (choke) hold by a police officer, CRS mediation provided an opportunity to discuss police restraint techniques which led to changes in policies regarding the use of force, specifically stopping the usage of choke holds.*

*Ukiah, CA - Following the July 1998, shooting death of an emotionally disturbed African American man, CRS mediated sessions of the community citizens group, local government and police. These sessions resulted in the implementation of procedures, protocols, and training for appropriate police response to mentally unstable citizens, thus resolving many community concerns about police activities.*

## Federal Laws

**Federal Criminal Enforcement.** This law prohibits one or more persons from acting under color of law willfully to deprive or conspire to deprive another person of any right protected by the Constitution or laws of the United States. (18 U.S.C. §§ 241, 242).

### Federal Civil Enforcement.

**"Police Misconduct Provision"** – This law prohibits State or local law enforcement officers from engaging in a pattern or practice of conduct that deprives persons of rights protected by the Constitution or laws of the United States. (42 U.S.C. §§14141).

**“Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the ‘OJP Program Statute’”** – Together, these laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex and religion by State and local law enforcement agencies that receive financial assistance from the Department of Justice. (42 U.S.C. §2000d, et seq. and 42 U.S.C. §3789d(c)).

## CRS Mission

In accordance with Title X of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 USC §2000g, CRS seeks to prevent or resolve community conflicts and tensions arising from actions, policies, and practices perceived to be discriminatory on the basis of race, color, or national origin. CRS provides services, including conciliation, mediation, and technical assistance, directly to people and their communities to help them resolve conflicts that tear at the fabric of our increasingly diverse society.

## Director’s Strategic Goals:

- To establish bridges between minority groups and law enforcement organizations in order to improve relations and community safety, and to reduce the potential for community conflict.
- To improve the preparedness of communities to respond to civil unrest, including activities by hate groups, through the provision of training, contingency planning, and technical assistance.
- To provide a high caliber of conflict resolution and prevention services to those communities most vulnerable to significant race relations tensions, conflicts, and violence.
- To build enhanced dispute resolution capabilities in local communities, including high schools, colleges and universities, so that local institutions will be able to resolve their own conflicts without external assistance.
- To create opportunities and mechanisms for constructive civic discourse on issues of race and ethnicity. CRS helps give national leadership and assistance to efforts to establish “places and spaces” for candid race relations discussions.

## Services Provided to Communities

When police use of force incidents increase community racial tensions, CRS conducts a thorough assessment to determine appropriate assistance. CRS meets with elected officials and community leaders, analyzing a variety of indicators, including the causes of the tensions, the potential for violence or continued violence, determining the level of communication among the parties and their interest in working together.

**Mediation and Conciliation.** Mediation and conciliation are two techniques used by CRS to help resolve police-community tensions arising from police use of force incidents. CRS conciliators provide an impartial forum between representatives of community groups and local government leaders to hold an orderly dialogue of the issues. CRS establishes with the parties mutually agreed upon ground rules and guidelines for discussion.

**Technical Assistance.** CRS assists local officials and community leaders with developing and implementing policies, practices, and procedures to help residents, organizations, and officials ease tensions and end conflicts.

**Training.** CRS conducts training sessions and workshops on cross-cultural and diversity issues, and police-minority community relations. CRS also trains police on ways to work with minority communities in racially charged situations, and to increase cooperation in areas such as identifying witnesses.

**Event Contingency Planning.** CRS provides technical assistance in contingency planning to ensure that marches, demonstrations, and similar events occur without exacerbating racial and ethnic tensions, while minimizing the prospect of any confrontations. CRS trains volunteers to carry out services such as providing information sharing, rumor control, demonstration marshals, and communication links with law enforcement agencies.

## CRS Headquarters, Regional and Field Offices

### Headquarters Office

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### Regional Offices and States Within Each Region

#### Region I - New England

99 Summer Street, Suite 1820

Boston, MA 02110

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Servicing: CT,MA,ME,NH,RI,VT

#### Region II - Northeast

26 Federal Plaza, Room 36-118

New York, NY 10278

(212) 264-0700

(212) 264-2143 (fax)

Servicing: NJ,NY,PR,VI

#### Region III - Mid-Atlantic

2nd and Chestnut Streets, Room 208

Philadelphia, PA 19106

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(215) 597-9148 (fax)

Servicing: DC,DE,MD,PA,VA,WV

#### Region IV - Southeast

75 Piedmont Avenue, NE, Room 900

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Servicing: AL,FL,GA,KY,MS,NC,SC,TN

#### Miami Field Office - Region IV

51 SW First Avenue, Room 424

Miami, FL 33130

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#### Region V - Midwest

55 West Monroe Street, Suite 420

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Servicing: IL,IN,MI,MN,OH,WI

#### Detroit Field Office - Region V

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(816) 426-7441 (fax)

Servicing: IA,KS,MO,NE

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1244 Speer Blvd., Room 650

Denver, CO 80204-3584

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Servicing: CO,MT,ND,SD,UT,WY

#### Region IX - Western

33 New Montgomery Street, Suite 1840

San Francisco, CA 94105

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### CRS Internet Address:

- [www.usdoj.gov/crs](http://www.usdoj.gov/crs)-

- <http://www.usdoj.gov/crs>-





## CRS Customer Service Standards

Our goal is to provide sensitive and effective conflict prevention and resolution services. You can expect us to meet the following standards when we work with you:

- We will clearly explain the process that CRS uses to address racial and ethnic conflicts and our role in that process.
- We will provide opportunities for all parties involved to contribute to and work toward a solution to the racial or ethnic conflict.
- If you are a participant in a CRS training session or conference, you will receive timely and useful information and materials that will assist you in preventing or minimizing racial and ethnic tensions. If you would like more information, we will work with you to identify additional materials and resources to meet your needs within three weeks of learning your need.
- We will be prepared to provide on-site services in major racial or ethnic crisis situations within 24 hours from the time when your community notifies CRS or CRS becomes aware of the crisis.

- In non-crisis situations, we will contact you within three days of when your community notifies CRS or CRS becomes aware of the situation to discuss your request for CRS services.

## CRS Publications

These publications are available free of charge.

CRS Fact Sheet

'Police Use of Deadly Force: A Conciliation Handbook for Citizens and the Police'

Principles of Good Policing: Avoiding Violence Between Police and Citizens

Avoiding Racial Conflict: A Guide for Municipalities

Police and Urban Youth Relations: An Antidote to Racial Violence

Planning for Safe Marches and Demonstrations

So . . . You're a Demonstration Marshal

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Community Relations Service

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